

Big-city railroading in a small apartment room

This HO scale shelf layout provides hours of model railroading enjoyment

By Howard Scodras • Photos by Peter Nesbitt

One reason many modelers never build a layout is that they think they don't have the space. Well, I've lived in apartments most of my life and can tell you that building a model railroad is possible, even if you don't have much room to spare. In fact, I was able to fit my HO scale Ontabec Central

shelf layout, a staging yard, spray booth, and small workbench into a 9½ x 11-foot spare room in my apartment.

When my wife and I lived in smaller apartments, I built model railroad dioramas. Sure, the dioramas weren't layouts, but they kept my modeling skills sharp and allowed me to try different

1. Above: When Howard Scodras designed the HO scale Ontabec Central, he wanted to re-create a big-city industrial area with lots of switching and street running. As OC Alco RS-1 no. 900 arrives at the Overbrook yard with a cut of cars, a Canadian National Budd Rail Diesel Car passes overhead.

techniques. When I began work on the Ontabec Central in 1992, I was able to apply the skills I gained building dioramas to my layout. Even though most of my model railroad is only 2'-4" wide, I made it appear bigger by modeling a big-city industrial area that features tall buildings, street running, and plenty of switching opportunities.

A pleasant problem

When my wife and I decided to move into this apartment, I quickly commandeered the spare room for my model railroad. She agreed, but issued the following caveat: All train-related activities, including building, painting, and storage of materials, must be done in the layout room. With the ground rules established, I began planning how to most effectively fit all these elements into the 9½ x 11-foot room.

It quickly became apparent that I would have to use the space under the layout for storage. At first I was concerned that storing items here would make layout wiring and maintenance difficult. Those concerns were quickly put to rest, though. I wired my shelf layout as a single block, and connected all the track to two no. 14 bus wires that terminate at a ¼" two-conductor jack installed on the fascia panel (see wiring illustration on page 65).

Since my operators have both DC and Digital Command Control (DCC) locomotives, I installed two matching ¼" phone plugs that are connected to the DC and DCC power supplies.

To make troubleshooting easier for the five turnouts powered by Tortoise switch motors, I extended the eight contacts of each motor to the front of the layout with eight-conductor cables terminating at screw-type terminal strips. The power supply for the switch motors also terminates here, but at a separate strip. This wiring arrangement makes it possible to reach all switch-motor connections without having to crawl under the layout. Even though my layout wiring is simple, I took detailed notes and drew diagrams so I wouldn't lose track of the under-benchwork circuits.

Taking it to the streets

As much as I take pride in the simplicity of the benchwork and wiring, the model railroad itself is the centerpiece of the room. I wanted the layout to be a re-creation of the scenes and type of railroading that I recalled as a child growing up in Montreal. The tall buildings, rail lines winding through the streets, and ample switching opportunities were all a must for the Ontabec Central RR.



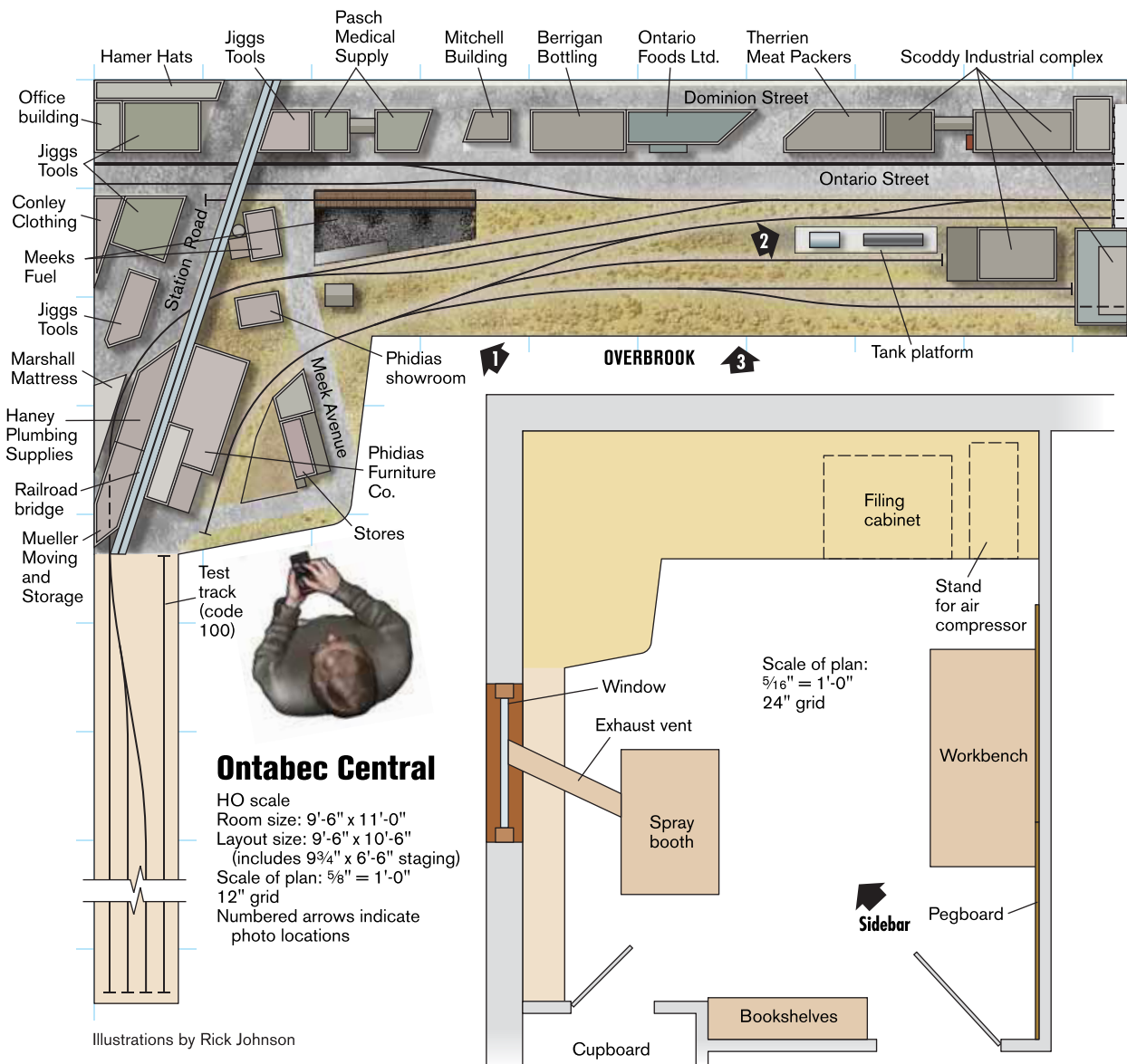
2. Scoddy Industries is the biggest business in Overbrook, so it requires regular switching. Canadian Pacific Alco S-2 no. 7019 is assigned to switch the plant today. With only one boxcar to deliver, the crew's work shouldn't take too long.

DISGUIISING hidden storage



Since my model railroad, spray booth, workbench, and supplies are all in one room, I had to use the space beneath the layout for storage. However, I needed a way to hide the stored items.

Since I'm not a seamstress, I knew sliding drapes were out. Then, while purchasing a Venetian blind for our kitchen, I thought, "These would also work great for the layout." I purchased enough Venetian blinds to go around the model railroad. The blinds add a touch of class to the layout, and they do a great job of keeping stored materials out of plain view. — H.S.



Ontabec Central

HO scale
 Room size: 9'-6" x 11'-0"
 Layout size: 9'-6" x 10'-6"
 (includes 9¾" x 6'-6" staging)
 Scale of plan: 5/8" = 1'-0"
 12" grid
 Numbered arrows indicate
 photo locations

Illustrations by Rick Johnson

Layout at a glance

Name: Ontabec Central
Scale: HO (1:87.1)
Size: L-shaped 9'-6" x 10'-6"
 (includes 9¾" x 6'-6" staging)
Prototype: free-lance
Locale: urban
Era: 1950s
Layout style: shelf
Length of mainline run: 12 feet
 plus 6 feet in staging
Layout height: 48½"
Benchwork: open grid
Roadbed: cork on 5/8" plywood
Track: code 70
Turnout minimum: no. 4
Minimum radius: 20"
Maximum grade: 0
Scenery: plaster covered with
 ground foam
Backdrop: foam core
Control: DC and Lenz Digital
 Command Control

I was further inspired to model large urban scenes after seeing the work of George Sellios and Earl Smallshaw. However, I kept asking myself, "With my small space, how can I emulate the work of these modelers?" The answer to the space issue was a small switching layout. The setting for my 1950s-era model railroad is the streets of an urban industrial area on the edge of a large city. I borrowed the Ontabec Central name (an amalgam of the two Canadian provinces I've lived in, Ontario and Quebec) from a 2 x 4-foot diorama I had built earlier.

Since my goal was to model big-city railroading, structures needed to dominate the scenery. I scratchbuilt, kit-bashed, and modified buildings in a variety of heights, depths, and colors to create a realistic urban environment.

Bringing the OC to life

A typical operating session begins with Ontabec Central Alco RS-1 no. 900 leaving the staging yard for Overbrook. The train has up to eight cars that it sets

off at the Meek Avenue siding. The locomotive then pushes any cars left on the runaround track from the previous operating session back to staging.

After the OC locomotive is back in staging, Canadian Pacific Alco S-2 no. 7019 begins its work. The crew assigned to this job faces some unique challenges. For example, a number of industries are served by a single siding that runs along Ontario Street. To reach these industries, other cars have to be temporarily moved off spot.

The inclusion of facing and trailing sidings offers additional switching problems as well. Crews must do some careful planning before they begin switching as there are several industries located in and around Meek Avenue siding.

Small layout, big benefits

I learned very quickly that careful planning is important if a small layout is to be a success. When I was drawing the track plan I realized I needed a runaround track for the type of opera-

tions I wanted. After studying the layout, I decided the best location would be Meek Avenue siding because it gives crews the most room to work.

The lack of a long mainline run is the big disadvantage of a small layout like mine. On the other hand I've found that my small layout has some advantages. From a financial perspective my layout was ideal because it didn't require much benchwork material. I've also found cleaning and electrical troubleshooting to be much easier.

Another benefit is the limited amount of equipment needed. My motive power fleet consists of a Canadian Pacific Alco S-2 and an Ontabec Central Alco RS-1. These two units are enough to keep trains moving during operating sessions.

My freight car roster has approximately 30 cars. Since I knew early on I wasn't going to need much rolling stock, I purchased high-end kits and added details such as uncoupling levers, brake hoses, and underbody details. I also installed semi-scale wheelsets and Kadec no. 58 scale couplers before I weathered the cars and put them on the layout.

Always more to do

The Ontabec Central has turned out to be all I expected and more. Now that the layout is fully operational, I can complete other projects I've been meaning to do. This suits me just fine as I find the building aspect of the hobby most enjoyable. I let members of my Friday night operating crew run the layout.

Currently I'm adding details to structures such as fire escapes, roof vents and pipes, and signs. I also have to finish installing sidewalks and assorted street-related details. All of these projects will greatly enhance the layout's appearance and give the Ontabec Central a big-city feel. **MR**



Meet Howard Scodras

Howard and his wife Gerry live in Ottawa, Ont., Canada. He became interested in model railroading when he built a Globe HO scale boxcar kit in 1950. Howard, a retired Bell Canada technician, credits Jacques Therrien, Mike Hamer, and his wife Gerry for making the OC a success.



3. To make his shelf layout appear deeper, Howard used a combination of structure kits, low-relief buildings, and backdrop cutouts. Examples of low-relief buildings and backdrop cutouts can be seen behind the structure kits. The terminal strips, control panel, and fascia boards are all visible in the foreground.

QUICK and EASY fascia panels

The wiring for the switch machines runs to screw-type terminal strips mounted on the face of the benchwork. I didn't want the wiring exposed, so I decided to conceal the terminal strips with fascia panels.

I wanted the fascia panel to have a wood-grain finish but didn't want to spend a lot of time sanding and staining wood. Then I remembered that prefinished shelves have a simulated wood finish. I purchased the shelves and had a friend cut them to size in his workshop.

Before I could install the fascia panels, though, I had to install 1½"-deep wood spacer blocks. Next, I secured the panels to the blocks with brass finishing screws. To finish the project I covered the front of the 5/8" plywood layout deck, which extends 3" over the front edge of the benchwork, with a veneer wood-grain tape.

The fascia panels look great and give the layout a finished, professional look. — H.S.

PANEL DETAILS

